

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 HA-05 MCT-01 IO-13 CIAE-00 COME-00
EB-08 INR-10 LAB-04 NSAE-00 SIL-01 DODE-00 PM-05
H-01 L-03 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11 /100 W
-----000653 171447Z /45 70

P R 162121Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8015
INFO USSOUTHCOM

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 4630

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT)

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS, ELAB, CO
SUBJ: CIVIL DISORDERS: STRIKES UNSETTLE PRE-ELECTION
ATMOSPHERE

REF: A) BOGOTA 4524, B) BOGOTA 3032

1. A PARTIALLY SUCCESSFUL 24-HOUR NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION STRIKE ON MAY 15 MAINTAINED THE AIR OF UNEASINESS BEGUN A WEEK EARLIER BY VIOLENT DEMONSTRATIONS PROTESTING A PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION FARE INCREASE (REF A).

2. IN BOGOTA, WHERE THE STRIKE WAS MOST EFFECTIVE, BUS SERVICE WAS CURTAILED BUT FAILED TO SERIOUSLY DISRUPT NORMAL ACTIVITIES. SOME VIOLENCE, ESPECIALLY ATTACKS ON BUSES, DID OCCUR, BUT HEAVY POLICE AND ARMY PATROLS CONTAINED THE DISORDERS. SOME SIXTY PERSONS REPORTEDLY WERE ARRESTED WITH NO SERIOUS INJURIES RECORDED. TRAFFIC WAS BACK TO NORMAL ON MAY 16 AS THE GOVERNMENT CONTINUED ITS EFFORTS TO SATISFY AT LEAST SOME OF THE TRANSPORT UNIONS' DEMANDS, WHICH INCLUDE HIGHER PAY AND SHORTER HOURS.

3. REPORTS FROM OUR CONSULATES CONFIRM THAT THE STRIKE WAS
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EVEN LESS EFFECTIVE OUTSIDE OF THE CAPITAL. IN MEDELLIN, INCREASED SECURITY PATROLS SAW LITTLE ACTION ON WHAT WAS A NEAR-NORMAL WORKDAY. THE PREVIOUS WEEK'S VIOLENCE IN CALI SEEMED TO HAVE DISSIPATED WITH NO MAJOR DISRUPTIONS REPORTED THERE. BARRANQUILLA WAS OBLIVIOUS TO THE STRIKE WHICH WAS NOT SUPPORTED IN THE REGION. ONLY MINOR DIFFICULTIES, IF ANY, WERE REPORTED IN OTHER MAJOR URBAN AREAS.

4. ADDING TO THE UNEASY ATMOSPHERE IS A THREAT BY OFFICIAL EMPLOYEES TO HOLD A 24-HOUR NATIONAL STRIKE ON MAY 18 OVER LABOR PROBLEMS IN THE OFFICIAL SECTOR. THE EMBASSY'S LABOR CONTACTS EXPECT THE STRIKE TO MATERIALIZE, BUT WITH A MINIMUM OF VIOLENCE. MOST PUBLIC PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS WILL PROBABLY BE CLOSED AND MANY GOVERNMENT OFFICES WILL BE AFFECTED, BUT OTHER ACTIVITIES SHOULD BE UNHINDERED.

5. IN GENERAL, THE GOVERNMENT HAS ADOPTED A CONCILIATORY ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE UNIONS, SOME OF WHICH HAVE REACTED RESPONSIBLY, AND HAS AVERTED SEVERAL OTHER STRIKES. THE GOVERNMENT-LABOR DIALOGUE RECENTLY LAUNCHED BY PRESIDENT LOPEZ IN A MOOD OF OPTIMISM (REF B) THREATENED TO BREAK DOWN LAST WEEK AS FOLLOW-UP COMMISSIONS FAILED TO MAKE PROGRESS, ACCORDING TO LABOR SOURCES BECAUSE OF GOVERNMENT RIGIDITY. THE NEW LABOR MINISTER, HOWEVER, IMMEDIATELY RESUME THE DIALOGUE PERSONALLY IN WHAT SOME LABOR LEADERS VIEWED AS A MORE OPEN AND COOPERATIVE SPIRIT.

6. COMMENT: THE GOVERNMENT'S ATTITUDE SEEMS TO BE BASED ON THREE IMPORTANT FACTORS -

A) ITS DETERMINATION TO HOLD THE JUNE 4 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN A PEACEFUL ATMOSPHERE;

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B) PRESIDENT LOPEZ' DESIRE TO LEAVE OFFICE IN THE MOST FAVORABLE POSSIBLE LIGHTS; AND,

C) THE NEW LABOR MINISTER'S INTENTION TO BEGIN HIS APPOINTMENT ON GOOD TERMS WITH ORGANIZED LABOR. DESPITE THE GENUINE UNREST AMONG MANY WORKERS AND THE PROVOCATION OF SOME LEFTIST GROUPS, THE GOVERNMENT EXPECTS TO BE ABLE TO ASSURE TRANQUILITY FOR JUNE 4. THIS MIGHT BE NO EASY TASK IF THE GOVERNMENT FAILS TO MAKE SIGNIFICANT CONCESSIONS TO LABOR'S DEMANDS.

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